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SUBJECT: EMBASSY ASHGABAT MARKS HOLOCAUST REMEMBRANCE DAY
WITH A SHOWING OF "SCHINDLER'S LIST"

¶1. (U) On April 25, approximately 60 people, including students, representatives of minority religious groups, NGO leaders, and teachers, gathered at post's newly inaugurated PD center to attend a viewing of Schindler's List to mark Holocaust Remembrance Day (Yom Hashoah). The movie was followed by a lively discussion about the causes of, and the lessons learned from, the Holocaust.

¶2. (SBU) Post had originally intended to host the event on January 27 (the day designated by the UN as the internationally recognized Holocaust Remembrance Day) and had intended to invite GOTX officials, the diplomatic corps, media, students, and others to attend a larger event. However, GOTX was reluctant to hold such an event since it would have detracted attention from GOTX's preparations for the President's Birthday. (Note: During conversations with the MFA to organize the showing of Schindler's List in January, the MFA interlocutor--apparently in all sincerity, but suspicious of USG intentions--asked questions such as: "What's the Holocaust?" and "What's the List about?" End Note.)

¶3. (U) Before the movie showing, Conoff gave an overview of the Holocaust and solicited the audience's thoughts about what the Holocaust was. Surprisingly, most of the audience knew what it was (although one of the audience members claimed that it was an attempt by Germans to get "Jewish money.") As the movie was shown, the audience attentively watched the movie, the vast majority staying to the end.

¶4. (SBU) Following the movie, Conoff led a group discussion about what the audience thought of the movie and about what they thought were the main causes of the Holocaust. Some ideas the audience gave as causes were: one group's/man's hatred of another group, the desire to gain and keep power, and a defeated nation's desire to take out its frustrations of defeat out on others. One woman suggested that general ignorance played a role in facilitating the Holocaust since television and internet did not exist during the war. This idea was countered by a member of the local Jewish community who argued that even after the invention of television and internet, genocides still occur. Conoff suggested that the crowd consider the idea that the Holocaust occurred due to basic intolerance of differences. Conoff opined that the Holocaust represented the worst form of intolerance: the intolerance of the physical existence of a group of people. He noted that there are many other forms of intolerance, for example the persecution of those who oppose the policies of their government, of those who want to have an independent voice, or have an opposing view to the status quo. (Note: Many appeared to see the veiled innuendo of what Conoff was talking about vis a vis Turkmenistan. End Note.)

15. (SBU) Conoff's comments generated a lively and unexpected discussion among the audience. One person suggested that it was necessary for governments to prevent such groups from gaining attention by restricting their access to media as a way of prevention. Another responded that governments needed to address the issues of general intolerance that exists among society as a means of prevention. One other participant, the head of the Kazakh Diaspora organization, said that it was necessary for mankind to take it upon itself to ensure that such tragedies never happen again. He recalled the famous saying about how one person remained silent while others were taken away since he was not a communist, Jew, political opponent, etc., and that when it was time for him to be taken away, there was nobody left to help him because everyone else was gone.

15. (SBU) Conoff then explained how the Holocaust impacted American foreign policy. He informed the audience that despite the fact that we were well informed of the threat Nazi Germany posed to European Jews and other targeted peoples, the United States, like other world democracies, refused to get involved to stop Hitler. America's failure to prevent the Holocaust has to this day weighed on our conscience as a nation, and has strengthened our resolve to promote democracy and oppose tyranny around the world. That is why the United States is in Iraq and Afghanistan, and that is also why we at the U.S. Embassy do what we are doing to promote human rights in Turkmenistan.

16. (SBU) The audience's response to Conoff's comments was overwhelmingly positive. Many expressed their appreciation that the embassy would even address such a subject and engage in discussion with average Turkmenistanis about it. Some suggested that the embassy should have chosen a bigger venue

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to hold the event and that the embassy should do more to advertise future films and events in order to attract a wider audience. (Note: Conoff did not inform the audience that the GOTX regularly stymies our efforts to conduct and advertise such events in bigger venues. End note.) Some asked Conoff to show &Schindler's List to their respective schools and organizations, ignoring suggestions that another less powerful film be shown.

COMMENT

17. (SBU) Post's decision to commemorate Holocaust Remembrance Day with a public showing of &Schindler's List was not only to mark this important event, but also to encourage discussion about discrimination, intolerance, human rights, and most importantly independent thought and how it may relate to individuals today. Although nobody mentioned Turkmenistan by name, it was clearly obvious among the members of the audience that many recognized that these problems exist here. Given the lively and sometimes emotional comments, the audience by and large seized the opportunity to freely speak their mind about such controversial issues. We plan to hold regular viewings of a variety of American movies that we hope will not only entertain Turkmenistanis, but to also get them thinking. END COMMENT.
JACOBSON